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BABEUF'S PLACE IN THE HISTORY OF SOCIALISM.

ULYSSES G. WEATHERLY.

In speaking of the French revolutionary movements of 1789, 1793, 1830, 1832, and 1848, Professor Werner Sombart declares that "we have here movements which are essentially middle-class; in them political liberties are sought, and, so far as the proletarians are concerned, the masses fight the battles of the middle classes." So far as the first phase of the revolution, that of 1789, is concerned, it is beyond controversy that the proletariat played no part as a separate, class-conscious order. But when Sombart asserts that the movement of 1793 was "essentially non-proletarian," it is impossible to reconcile his view with the explicit utterances of the great terrorists or with the clearly marked trend of political activity. Delbrück, on the other hand, has expressed the belief that Marat and Robespierre were true social democrats, and Menger declares that Babeuf's conspiracy was the starting point of the present social movement.¹ It had already become apparent in 1793 that the form of political equality as taught by Rousseau was incapable of realization in the face of an uncontrolled inequality of property. The note of protest against the abuses of property and against the capitalist class grew ever stronger in the months preceding the Terror. Foreign war and domestic insurrection left to the Jacobin leaders little time to work out fundamental social doctrines, but it is not difficult to see that Robespierre and Saint-Just, if left in perma-

¹ Right to the Whole Produce of Labor, London, 1899, p. 63.

nent control, would have been carried by the logic of their own doctrines to the principle of social control of property.

That this trend had been clearly manifest is indicated by the fact that the Thermidorean reactionaries thought it necessary to push through the Convention, after Robespierre's death, a proclamation declaring: "Property ought to be sacred. Far from us those systems dictated by immorality and indolence which would prolong the horrors of thievery and erect it into a settled principle. Let the authority of the law guarantee the right of property as it guarantees all the other right of citizens."² Mallet du Pan, in his *Mémoires*, asserts that the Jacobins "were tending toward an agrarian law, toward the community of goods and powers, and toward the establishment of an agrarian, military and conquering democracy; they had declared war on commerce, on the arts and on industry, and wished to change France into a republic of soldier-laborers."³ Thermidor checked the tendency toward an economic revolution just at the moment when its significance was becoming apparent.

Loss of power by the Jacobins at Thermidor had the usual effect of putting the more radical element in control of that party. Then, as so often in later years, the cry was raised that the revolution had after all only resulted in putting the bourgeoisie into the saddle. From the extreme element of the Mountain, from the irrepressible democrats who had learned their political philosophy from Rousseau, came the men who followed "Gracchus" Babeuf in his conspiracy against the Constitution of 1795. When these conspirators were arrested the charge against them was merely that of attempting the overthrow of the

² 9 October, 1794, Buchez et Roux, XXXVI, 128.

³ *Mémoires*, II, 117.

Directory. At their trial before the High Court at Vendôme it was the political aspect of the conspiracy that was emphasized, for the evidence with reference to Babeuf's doctrine of community of property does not seem to have been then fully known to the prosecution. Perhaps it is for this reason that it has become the habit of historians to regard the Babouvists as merely another group of revolutionary conspirators, the successors of political Jacobinism. They were this, but they were more. Babeuf demanded first of all the restoration of the Constitution of 1793 and in this he regarded himself merely as the successor of Robespierre. Several times arrested, he continued to agitate against the Thermidorean government as being the destroyer of the republic.⁴

This was the political phase of his programme. But while in prison at Arras in the middle of 1795 he went over definitely to the communistic doctrine, and shifted the stress of agitation from political to economic issues. From this time his paper, the *Tribun du Peuple*, began to attack private property as an obstacle to political equality. "The Revolution is not ended," says a Babouvist document of a little later period, "because the rich absorb all valuable products and have exclusive command, while the poor toil like slaves and count for nothing in the state."⁵

⁴ The chief sources on Babouvism are:

Advielle, *Histoire de Gracchus Babeuf et du Babovisme*, 2 vols., Paris, 1884.

Buonarrotti, *Histoire de la Conspiration pour l'égalité dite de Babeuf*, 2 vols., Bruxelles, 1828; later editions, Paris, 1830, 1842 and 1850. An English translation by "Bron-terre," appeared at London in 1836.

The principal Babouvist documents were republished in Reybaud's *Réformateurs ou Socialistes Modernes*, 2 ed., Paris, 1848. Tome II, pp. 358, ff.

Both Advielle and Buonarrotti (first edition) give the documents in full.

⁵ *Analyse de la Doctrine de Babeuf*.

At this period also there dawned upon Babeuf a sense of the iniquity of the existing exploitation of labor as clear, if not as lucidly expressed, as that of Marx himself. "I behold," he says in a letter to Germain in July, 1795, "I behold without shirts, without clothes, without shoes nearly all those who prepare for use flax and hemp and wool or silk, nearly all those who weave, who make cloth and clothing, who prepare leather, who make shoes."⁶ "If," he continues, "I then consider the little minority who lack for nothing, the landholders, I behold this minority composed of all those who do no work, of all those who are content to calculate, to combine, to juggle, to revive and rejuvenate under ever new forms the old conspiracy of a part against the whole, that is, the conspiracy by which a multitude of hands are set at work without the owners of those hands getting the natural fruit of their labor, but those fruits are heaped up in great masses in the hands of criminal speculators. The latter, having exerted themselves ceaselessly to reduce the wages of labor, combine with their fellow thieves, the merchants, to fix the price of everything so that this price is only within the reach of the members of their own group. . . . Thereafter those numerous hands (of the laborers) can grasp nothing, touch nothing, and the real producers are devoted to destruction, or at least the little that is left to them is only the mere froth or meager scrapings of the products of nature."⁷

But it is not alone against the capitalistic manufacturers that Babeuf brings this indictment. The whole business organization of existing society is part of the same vicious system. "Commerce," he declares, "ought to vivify everything and carry an equal support to all its agents," and he classes as agents of commerce all who in any way

⁶ *Advielle I*, 145-146.

⁷ *Ibid.*

co-operate in the processes of production. But why, he inquires, do the original agents of production, those who do the creative labor, the essential labor, receive incomparably smaller returns than the merchants who do only the most subordinate part of the labor—that of exchange? It is because the latter class “despoil,” while the laborers allow themselves to be “despoiled.” It is because the capitalists and merchants league together to hold in their grasp the “real producer, in order to be always in a position to say to him, ‘Work much and eat little, else you shall have no more work, and especially you shall not have anything at all to eat.’”⁸

Released from prison in October, 1795, Babeuf returned to Paris with the settled purpose to work no longer merely for the restoration of the Constitution of 1793, but primarily for the establishment of that communistic system which he now believed necessary in order to make the republic a reality. Denouncing private property as the chief source of all the calamities that afflicted society, he proceeded to combine the more radical of the surviving party of the Mountain with his own immediate followers into a group known at first as the *Société Politique pour le Triomphe de l'égalité*, later called the *Société du Panthéon*, which continued its existence until interdicted by the Directory, 27 February, 1796, when the Babouvists were arrested.

Consisting as it thus did of one section whose chief interest was political revolution and of another concerned primarily for radical economic reorganization, the *Société du Panthéon* was never a homogeneous group, and even Babeuf's immediate followers were not wholly agreed on the details of the economic programme. After much debate all parties united in a statement of principles

⁸ Advielle I, 147.

called the Manifesto of the Equals, setting forth the evils of the existing order and outlining a social system in harmony with the extremest ideas of equality. But, like the terrorists, the Babouvists were compelled to devote most of their energy to preparing a war for the establishment of their political system, and were not able to elaborate their social theories as they might have done in a period of internal peace. On account of the troublous times in which they worked they were of necessity rather the soldiers than the apostles of the movement for which they stood.

A secret Directory of Public Safety had charge of the revolutionary propaganda. This body in addition to preparing for insurrection found time to formulate a tentative economic decree to be submitted to the national assembly when the revolution should have succeeded. The chief points set forth were:

(1) That the unequal distribution of goods is the inexhaustible source of slavery and all public calamities.

(2) That labor by all is the essential condition of the social contract.

(3) That the ownership of all the wealth of France resides essentially in the people of France who alone can determine and change the distribution of it.⁹

The first crude and verbose statements of economic doctrine in Babeuf's letters and in the *Tribun du Peuple* were supplanted by a document entitled *Analyse de la Doctrine de Babeuf*, prepared by Sylvain Maréchal and indorsed by Babeuf. This, together with the Manifesto of the Equals already mentioned and Babeuf's *Lettre a M. V*—furnishes the principal source of first-hand information as to the actual theories of the group. As a system of society Babouvism was undoubtedly a purely communistic

⁹ Buonarrotti, II, 157.

plan. Never before had the doctrine of absolute leveling been so explicitly proclaimed. "Let there no longer be any other differences among men than those of age and sex," exclaims the Manifesto. Since all have the same wants and the same faculties, let all accordingly have the same education, the same housing, the same nourishment. "They are content with a common sun and the same air for all; why should not the like portion and the same quality of food suffice for each according to his wants?" "The aim of society is happiness, and happiness is equality." So long as private property exists such equality is impossible, for property gives unequal powers. Proudhon's dictum, "Property is theft," was clearly foreshadowed in an utterance by Babeuf even before he became an avowed communist, "All that those possess who have more than their due individual share of the goods of society is theft and usurpation; it is therefore just to take it away from them."¹⁰ The land is to be made common property, cultivation being controlled by a central administration so that there shall be in each commune a well regulated body of cultivators working in harmony with the general interest. Private commerce in agricultural products is to be abolished, and all commodities collected into public magazines, whence they are to be distributed by the administration to citizens according to their needs. For it is needs and not productive power that are to determine distribution. Labor is required from all, and to distribute to each according to his work would mean inequality, since all cannot work alike. "The unequal production of equal labor," says Buonarrotti, "ought to be rewarded by an impartial distribution."¹¹

¹⁰ *Tribun du Peuple*, No. 33, cited by Menger: Right to the Whole Produce of Labor.

¹¹ Buonarrotti, I, 257, note.

It follows then that charity to the dependent classes as such disappears. Marat and Saint-Just had denounced poverty and mendicancy as disgraceful to a democratic state. To the Babouvists the rights of the dependent and defective classes are equal to those of the workers so far as regards the goods of society. Since they cannot work, the right of property is replaced by the "right of every individual to an existence as happy as that of all the other members of the social body."¹²

It is hardly necessary to say that the Babouvists, being disciples of Rousseau, were hostile to the existence of cities. Their ideal system is one of communes more or less rural in character, where men are kept in direct contact with nature. Babeuf looks forward to the time when the arts working in harmony with the tillers of the soil, shall extinguish the great cities—those receptacles of every vice—and cover France with villages adorned with crowds of happy residents.¹³ Buonarrotti is still more emphatic. He characterizes cities as a symptom of public discontent and a sure precursor of civil convulsions. The gathering there of great wealth and luxury breeds sycophancy, dependency and moral disorder. Moreover, constant change of services and of wages where wealth and luxury abound makes certain classes necessarily inferior and thus destroys equality.¹⁴

But while Babouvism was thus a communistic system, and in fact a more or less utopian one, it was based on economic doctrines equivalent to and often identical with those of modern scientific socialism. If, as Marx declared, there can be no political movement which is not at the same time social and economic, then the Babouvists were the first of the moderns to perceive the econ-

¹² Buonarrotti, I, 208.

¹³ Réponse a M. V: Buonarrotti, II. 225.

¹⁴ Buonarrotti, I, 221-224.

omic basis of the social problem and to state the socialistic philosophy of society. Stripped of verbiage and the sentimental cant of Rousseauism, there remains in their teaching the essence of nearly every important dogma of the modern socialist party.

Babeuf foresaw the central point of attack on socialism, in the charge that it would destroy the incentive to progress by destroying specialized tastes and aptitudes and by *withdrawing the personal stimulus to scientific research and invention*. He meets this with the contention that science and invention depend "more on love of glory than on love of wealth." In a communistic state, he declares, genius would be honored and rewarded better than under the present corrupt system where genius and virtue starve while folly and crime prosper. In any case the results of industry and the inventions of genius are rightly the property of society, for they are the products of previous inventions and industry, by which the new inventors and workers have profited in the life of society and which have aided them in their discoveries.¹⁵ Thus early was the theory of "projected efficiency" anticipated.

Upon the question of the economic effects of machinery the Babouvists also had their word, and this was in essential harmony with the later views of Marx and Lassalle. If invention is really a social and not a personal achievement, then, they declare, the fruits of invention ought to go to society in lessened labor and more easily accessible products. Only in a communistic society, says Buonarrotti, can improved mechanical processes be a benefit, for there alone they operate to the benefit of the whole of society. Where private property in the instruments of production exists machinery is a means of exploiting

¹⁵ Babeuf's *Défense*, Advielle II, 40, where Babeuf cites from the *Tribun du Peuple*, No. 35.

labor in the interest of the capitalist whose profits it augments.¹⁶

That culture and industry should be associated is a fundamental principle of socialistic teaching, whether utopian or scientific. The Babouvists would have carried this doctrine to extreme limits. Not only in the education of the young but in the whole realm of industry, art and intellect were to be inseparably associated with work. Æsthetics if divorced from industry they believed to be a promoter of class distinctions. Sylvain Maréchal, against the judgment of some of his colleagues, had even incorporated into the Manifesto the sentence, "Perish the arts if need be, provided only equality be left to us." Babeuf and Buonarrotti believed, on the other hand, that the arts would have a large use in giving pleasure and instruction to a society better able to profit by them than the existing one. It is the duty of the state, says Buonarrotti, to provide not only necessities but pleasurable things as well to its citizens; but only such enjoyments as can be shared by all alike should be allowed. All others are to be sternly repressed.¹⁷

The very nature of his surroundings forced Babeuf into the ranks of revolutionary socialists. The Manifesto asserts that, since equality is the natural order of society, to resort to revolution in order to secure it is merely to "revert to order," an evil which, compared with the continuance of the existing anarchic system, is small. Babeuf was willing that "all should return to chaos" in order that out of this chaos there should come a new and rejuvenated world.¹⁸ To the inevitable objection that a socialistic system could not be successfully administered over a country so extensive as France, he admits that a

¹⁶ Buonarrotti, I, 211-212, note.

¹⁷ Buonarrotti, I, 210.

¹⁸ Babeuf, Réponse a M. V.

strong administration would be necessary, but contends that a central body in control of industry, keeping constantly in touch with all the communes and informed of their needs and resources, could more effectively adjust production and exchange to demand than the wasteful competitive regime with its famines and its overproduction. He saw, if he did not state as clearly as Engels later did, the dangers of overproduction and the "vicious cycle" theory of commercial crises. Into the details of the governmental system, however, Babeuf did not go. For him and for the surviving Jacobins, the restoration of the Constitution of 1793 was to be the foundation principle of all political action. He had some idea however of how complicated the machinery of the socialistic republic must be, and Alfred Espinas has characterized his scheme as a "debauch of administration."¹⁹

If, then, Babouvism was, as it claimed to be, the logical development of the philosophy of Rousseau, Robespierre and Saint-Just, it seemed, like democracy itself, to have been completely extinguished at Babeuf's death in 1797. Ordinarily regarded as merely the last gasp of expiring Jacobinism, it is habitually connected in thought backward with the events of the revolutionary period and not at all forward with the history of social democracy in the next century. But Babeuf was more than the last of Robespierre's disciples. He was the connecting link between eighteenth century political democracy and modern revolutionary socialism. For more than thirty years after 1797 Babeuf and Babouvism were practically forgotten. But after the Revolution of 1830 Buonarrotti, one of the leading spirits in the conspiracy, returned from exile and took up his residence in Paris. Already in 1828 he had published at Brussels his history of Ba-

¹⁹ *Revue Internationale de Sociologie*, VI, 316.

beuf's conspiracy, which was also an exposition of the doctrines of the school and which contained the chief documents in which they were set forth. This book, repeatedly reissued, had incalculable influence in the following years in forming the minds of the younger generation of extreme democrats, who imbibed from it those socialistic ideas which they now regarded as the natural outcome of democracy. Buonarrotti himself became the honored friend and adviser of some of the men who were destined to be champions of the social democratic movement. Chief among these was Louis Blanc, and the group also included Charles Teste and Voyer d'Argenson.²⁰ It is still a question whether Marx himself was not more influenced by economic ideas coming to him indirectly from this French source than by those of the obscure English socialists to whom Menger assigns credit for the leading Marxian ideas. For, despite the vagueness and mysticism of much of his teaching, it is with the militant political socialism of Louis Blanc and the Commune that Babeuf's system is to be classed, and not with the utopian idealism of Saint-Simon and Fourier.

²⁰ See Advielle, I, 360-361; also Louis Blanc, *History of Ten Years*, Philadelphia, 1848, II, 228-229.